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Scaling the Incommensurate: Discourses of Sustainability in the Western Isles of Scotland.

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1. Introduction

In this chapter I look at competing *discourses of sustainability* as they are differentially constructed and negotiated by a fishing-dependent community in the Western Islands of Scotland and national and transnational governmental bodies. More specifically, I will focus on ongoing negotiations over fishing rights and the local management of marine resources. These are highly contentious issues in the Western Isles, and across Scotland in general, given the fall in stock levels, the generally precarious socioeconomic conditions of fishing communities in the country, international access to local waters, and disagreements over centrally-determined quotas for both local and international fleets. Moreover, local communities and fishing organisations in the region have a historic distrust of national and international policymakers and negotiations between the different groups have proven problematic. In a recent innovation, however, legislation such as the 2015 Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act¹ has been passed to facilitate local involvement in national and international decision-making processes. One specific outcome of the Act is that the national group responsible for overseeing European Union (EU) marine and environmental policies, Scottish National Heritage (SNH), has authorised community groups on one of the Western Isles, Barra, to formulate a local management plan. Such a plan would involve the community in both the design and regulation of areas where marine exploitation is restricted, though policy will ultimately be under the control of SNH. To date, however, only limited progress has been made

One possible obstacle to reconciling the different perspectives of those involved is the contrast in scope and intensity of the groups' activities, and hence the discourses they produce. A central question raised in this paper is the extent to which such differences are simply a matter of *scale* (Singh and Bartlett 2017; Blommaert 2010, 207, 2005; Kell 2013) with local and national discourses feeding into each other in different ways, or whether they render the two discourse systems *incommensurate*. In order to address this question I first outline the central premises of *scales theory*, as it has been taken up in discourse analysis from human geography, and provide an overview of the socioeconomic context in the Western Isles. These two sections form the basis of a discussion of the affordances and limitations of scales theory in contributing to *discourse across difference* in contexts such as the one described. I conclude that scalar thinking is an essential foundation to such an undertaking, but that issues relating to incommensurability remain unresolved and that a continuous process of abductive thinking will be necessary to tackle these.

2. Scales Theory

The concept of scales has been taken into language studies from systems theory and, more specifically, from human geography (Swyngedouw 1998, Uitermark 2002) and world system analysis (Wallerstein 1998), where it was developed to account for the stratified and nested nature of social interaction. Put simply, scales theory challenges simple dichotomies between micro and macro structures in which the micro is seen as a miniature version of some macro of indeterminate size or

the macro is treated merely as the background against which the micro operates and can be interpreted (Blommaert 2007, 2018a:1-20). In the scales model, while actions have repercussions at higher and lower scales (unlike the static macro-micro model), the nature of the interaction within and between scales is different (unlike the macro-in-miniature model). The difference of perspective in scales theory can best be illustrated, appropriately enough, through the example of the internal interaction of villages as a unit at one scale, while interaction between villages, often centred in towns serving as local hubs, functions at a separate scale. The model can be repeated to account for interactions 'all the way up' to multinational organisations and trading blocks. And, importantly, as interactions at the village level are qualitatively different from those at different scales, they are often not functionally operative at higher scales. Thus issues of power between those operating at different scales and the limitations on movement across sites, including migration, become central concerns of the model. For the purposes of the current paper the three principles following can be taken as defining tenets of scales theory as it is currently operationalised in sociolinguistic theory:

Firstly, the units of interaction as described in human geography become for discourse analysis *centring institutions* (Blommaert 2005:2019), with norms and values to which interactions orient, while the physical boundaries of these units are reimagined as the *scope of communicability* of texts,² that is the extent in time and space over which a text or discourse is effective, accepted or legitimated and, in particular, how well different texts travel across physical or virtual frontiers in the age of globalisation. Related but not identical to the scales at which texts and discourses operate is the scope of spatiotemporal reference within the texts, inasmuch as this indexes the centring institutions to which they orient and the scope of communicability to which they lay claim. The normative spatiotemporal frame indexed in this way is labelled a *chronotope* (Bakhtin 1981; Agha 2007; Perrino 2015; Blommaert 2015). This aspect of scales theory raises questions of *voice* and power and the differential distribution of linguistic resources, and hence access to centring institutions, amongst different sectors of the population (Hymes 1996; Kell 2013; Bartlett 2012; Blommaert 2005).

Secondly, individual texts – and, by extension, individual discourses – do not operate in isolation, but are inextricably linked to, and draw into themselves, discourses operating over longer *durées*, both spatial and temporal. These interconnections carry with them both constraints and affordances for action in the here and now. As stated above, however, this perspective goes beyond a simple dichotomy of micro and macro to consider a single situation as the *layered simultaneity* of multiple interlocking scales, all of which may be attended to through the accompanying text, including any absences it displays (Blommaert 2005). In this regard individual texts or discourses may demonstrate varying degrees of *polycentricity* (Blommaert 2010) as the speaker of speakers orient at different times to the norms values and of different centring institutions;

Thirdly, the concepts of *upscaling* and *downscaling* have been introduced to account for the strategic movement from one physical scale to another in practice and the textual modifications this entails. This concept, which we can refer to more broadly as *rescaling*, often carries the twin assumptions that: (i) there is a hierarchical ordering of discourses across society; and (ii) that increases in the scope of reference of a text, from the particular to the general, will correlate with an increase in the scope of legitimacy (Blommaert 2007:6; see Singh et al. 2016 for a discussion of downscaling).

The following section provides a brief overview of the socioeconomic conditions in the Western Isles, and Barra in particular, and the contested nature of sustainability (Brown 2015). And in Section 4 I consider the affordances and constraints of scales theory in contributing to a discourse across difference within that specific context.

3. Sustainability and its discourses in the Western Isles

The island of Barra is at the southern end of the Western Isles of Scotland, or Na h-Eileanan an Iar, to give them the Gaelic name that is the official designation of the Scottish parliamentary constituency they comprise. Moving northwards from Barra the major islands in the archipelago are South Uist, Benbecula, North Uist, Harris and Lewis. The population of Barra at the last census (2011) was 1264, a decrease of 50% from the 1901 figure of 2545, but an 8% rise since the 2001 figure. Such fluctuations in the population are not uncommon, as the table below (from Brennan 2015:4) demonstrates:

Year	1901	1911	1921	1931	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011
Pop.	2545	2620	2456	2250	1884	1467	1090	1339	1282	1172	1264

Table 1 Population change in Barra and the Outer Hebrides 1901-2011.

Going back a further 60 years we see another extreme drop in population between the 1841 and 1851 censuses, with the figure falling 21% from 2363 to 1873 (Campbell 1998, in Brennan 2015:4). This sudden depopulation was the result of the evictions and forced emigration across rural Scotland that are known as the Clearances, during which period Barra and the neighbouring Uists were particularly hard hit, with 1700 islanders emigrating to Canada in 1851 alone (Richards 2013). While in some accounts the Clearances were the inevitable result of population growth in unproductive areas, intensified by the Potato Famine, in the popular imagination they are characterised as the brutal exploitation of local communities by external actors seeking economic gain at all costs. This is a motif that runs strong in Highland culture, as illustrated by the 1992 anthem from Gaelic supergroup Capercaillie, lamenting the effect of Thatcherite economic policies on the Highlands (Donald Shaw, copyright Survival Records Ltd):

*Here come the Clearances, my friend
Silently our history is coming to life again
We feel the breeze from the storm to come
And up and down this coast
We're waiting for the wheel to turn*

The spectre of depopulation looms large in the islands, a sentiment that the significant rise between 2001 and 2011 does little to dissipate. Not least, this is because these figures mask a shift in the demographics as the pattern of in- and out-migration that created the relative stability of the last 30 years is changing. During this period, teenagers would go to school in Lewis or on the mainland, and many would seek employment and thrills in Glasgow or elsewhere when they left school. There was a tendency, however, for islanders to return once they had young families, and so the cycle continued. This cycle is perceived as under threat, however, as economic opportunities are diminishing and, in some cases, parents are opting to send their children to school on the mainland sooner, so making it less likely they will feel the pull to return (Euan Scott, VABV, *pers. comm.*; Brennan 2015:5; CBAB 2010b). Recent well-publicised manifestations of the decline in services are the threatened closure of the only bank on the island³, the difficulties in recruiting a secondary level maths teacher⁴; and the abrupt decision to shut down the local Tourist Office⁵.

In terms of employment, Barra was a major herring port until the middle of the last century, and the economy has always been heavily linked to maritime industries. Despite the decline and virtual disappearance of the herring fleets over the last century, however, Barra remains a fisheries-

dependent community (Brennan 2015:6) and a recent report (Halcrow Group Limited 2010:19) states that:

...as many as a quarter of the working population of Barra is involved in fisheries; either directly as fishermen, or working in the fish processing sector, or indirectly in sectors such as administration, transport, equipment maintenance and marketing. This equates to around 200 people within a working population of around 800.

This contrasts with the figures for Scotland as a whole, where fisheries-related industries account for 0.9% of employment, while even in coastal regions the figure is only 2.6% (Brookfield *et al.* 2005, Thomson 2002). The result of this is, as Brennan (2015:6) puts it:

Environmental impacts (such as depletion of fish stocks) and international pressures (such as changing European legislation) particularly affect the fishing and fish farming industries (CBAB 2010b). The designation of the Western Isles (excluding Stornoway and its environs on the isle of Lewis) as economically fragile underscores the need for sustainable development opportunities which combine economic, social, cultural and environmental attributes (HIE 2014).

This statement brings out the potentially opposing forces of socioeconomic and environmental factors within highly contested definitions of *sustainability* and *sustainable development*. The statement also points to the different *scales* within and across which this debate is carried out, from the local to the national, and beyond to the supranational, in the form of the European Union (EU).

EU legislation on fishing, and in particular the Common Fisheries Policy, has long been a source of heated debate in Scotland, with the imposition of quotas⁶ and the opening of coastal waters to EU fleets⁷ being particularly contentious issues which are often treated as political footballs. One of the most recent manifestations of EU policy has been the designation of Special Areas of Conservation, which are, according to the UK's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs⁸:

...strictly protected sites designated under the EC Habitats Directive. Article 3 of the Habitats Directive requires the establishment of a European network of important high-quality conservation sites that will make a significant contribution to conserving the 189 habitat types and 788 species...

In 2013, waters around Barra were designated Marine Special Areas of Conservation (mSACs), a move which was met with some hostility by local fishermen, as reported in *FishUpdate* of 14h July that year⁹.

CAMPAIGNERS in the Outer Hebrides have reacted with dismay after the Scottish Government announced the designation of the Sound of Barra as a marine Special Area of Conservation (mSAC).

The ruling by environment minister Paul Wheelhouse means the sea and sandbanks between Barra and South Uist will go forward to the European Commission for inclusion in plans for an EU-wide network of SACs.

The move follows a recommendation for designation from Scottish Natural Heritage last November – despite local concerns about restrictions on traditional livelihoods such as fishing and lack of accountability¹⁰.

Action group Southern Hebrides Against Marine Environmental Designations (SHAMED), doubted whether eco-tourism would compensate for reduced fishing revenues. Chairman Angus MacLeod said from his prawn boat in the south Minch: ‘We have lost all faith in the government and their promises and assurances.

‘The minister has stated it will be of benefit to tourism – but Barra already has a very good tourism industry as it is.

‘The government’s own report has recognised that designation will hit the economy to the value of £1 million per annum.

‘There is no way tourism will make up that kind of balance and even if it did Barra does not have the infrastructure to deal with that.’

He added: ‘We have always said if the government was serious about local management for a marine designated area they should start with Mingulay reef [already an SAC] before progressing with any decision on the Sound of Barra.

‘Now the minister has rubber stamped the designation it is under European control – and I can’t see how any local management plan will work.’

In this piece we can sense MacLeod’s antagonism towards national government bodies and in particular how they have ceded authority to “European control”. This attitude stands in contrast to fishing groups in other areas, as discussed by Pieraccini and Cardwell (2016), who state that “while in Scilly the new Marine Conservation Zones have been perceived as a positive addition to the seascape, in Barra the Special Area of Conservation has been heavily contested by the local community”. This contrast in attitudes is attributed to “divergent ‘legal consciousness’ [as] a socio-legal concept concerned with the ways in which the law is experienced, interpreted and re-shaped by ordinary people” and which “is a dependent variable, being the product of three main causes: history, power relationships between regulators and regulatees and risk” (Pieraccini and Cardwell 2016:21). Pieraccini and Cardwell (2016:25) conclude that in Barra “the environmentalists of Scottish Natural Heritage are usually seen as outsiders, imposing limitations from afar. The SAC is consistently seen as externally imposed”, as illustrated in one of their interviews:

“The people who live out here live out here. Live, eat, work, breathe the place. And when you get people, whoever they may be, bureaucrats, politicians, scientists or whatever who come out here and tell them things, tell them what to do or what not to do, it doesn't come across very well at all.” (sea-user interview 2014, February 17).

Pieraccini and Caldwell (2016:25) attribute such antagonism to “poor communication” as much as bad will on SNH’s part. This sentiment is echoed by Sheena, a Barra local involved in various self-sufficiency initiatives¹¹:

Tom: *how’d that look then if they were to do work with [[[Local Organisation]]]?*

Sheena: *[I think they would have to come in and they’d have to listen to people before they say anything (.) just listen about what people’s priorities are and then work out how they can help as opposed to putting stuff on the community*

Tom: *uhum uhum*

Sh: *you know and it could be that what they want and what the community wants are actually very similar*

Tom: *uhum*

Sh: *but there's always this there's gonna be this tension and the spite (.) if they just come and just listen*

Tom: *uhum*

Sh: *you know and listen to what the community wants how the community wants to develop and grow and whatever then it could be there's really good tie-ups there*

Singh and Bartlett 2017:57

Poor communication alone, however, cannot account for the differences in “legal consciousness” between the people of Barra and the Scillies. The “long shadow” of the past (Brennan 2015:161), of the Clearances and of perceived centralised indifference, must also be considered a significant factor in the Western Islanders’ distrust of external interference. Such an attitude is eloquently expressed in the following response, from a representative of SHAMED, to an open letter I posted in the community paper, *Guth Bharraidh* (31/5/2013):

You believe that our “conflict and misunderstanding” have come about because both sides have a different understanding of “sustainability”. There is only one version of sustainability acceptable to those who have influence on political powers in Scotland. It is rigorously imposed via SAC’s, SPA’s and National Parks and, in the near future, through MPA’s. It is partly based on the mistaken belief that food production and access to our natural resources, specifically in the north and west of Scotland, is no longer of primary importance. It dictates that the needs of wildlife and habitats are more important than the needs of human beings. Some people believe an environment without people is a good thing. This view should not be legalised in any civilised society.

The conflict is caused, therefore, not just because many people disagree with this “vision” of sustainability but because nobody is allowed to question it. There is no real discussion. Both sides know this. The conflict is therefore a power struggle, not a mere difference of opinion.

Out of this disputatious situation there has been an interesting development in that Scottish Natural Heritage has authorised the communities on Barra, under the stewardship of Voluntary Action Barra and Vatersay, to formulate a local management plan that involves the communities in both the design and regulation of the mechanisms for the mSACs etc. This move is in line with tendencies within both the EU and the Scottish Government towards increased stakeholder involvement in development. According to the Scottish Government, the Community Empowerment Act (2015)¹² “will help to empower community bodies through the ownership or control of land and buildings, and by strengthening their voices in decisions about public services”¹³ while, according to the EU’s Habitats Directive, as summed up by Pieraccini (2014):

The community can be a partner in the drafting of the management scheme, it can also give opinions on prospective plans and projects via consultation mechanisms but please note that a feature of the Habitats Directive is that because it places a general obligation on Member States to secure favourable conservation status of Natura 2000 sites, the Regulations require the Relevant Authorities and Competent Authorities to exercise their functions as to secure compliance with the Directive [...while] Reg. 48 (4) states that the competent authority can, if they consider it appropriate, take the opinion of the general public; and if they do so, they shall take such steps for that purpose as they consider appropriate. This however is a power not a duty.

As this summary suggests, the extent and authority of community involvement in the management process is negotiable, a situation that “invites” (Carpentier 2017:276) both the scepticism of Angus MacLeod (above) and the optimism of Western Isles Councillor Donald Manford¹⁴:

Since the last century our community has been striving to stem the relentless loss of influence over the environment and resources around our shores. We have for the first time an exciting opportunity to create a structure which will empower the people who work here to actively manage our resources.

To date, there has been little progress with the development of the community management plan. Drawing on the ideas expressed above, I will suggest in the remainder of this paper that this deadlock arises not from communicative problems alone, but the way in which the different discourses are embedded in the materiality of the speakers’ lived conditions, the timeframe of social memory within which these are interpreted, and issues of power and control. These are all concepts that fall within the outline of scales theory presented above and in the concluding section I will assess the affordances and limitations of the theory in promoting discourse across difference in the present context.

4. Scales analysis

In this section I outline some issues involved in comparing and contrasting the discourses of sustainability of the local communities and the governmental organisations. I will illustrate the discussion with examples from the two discourses but with two important and interconnected caveats: firstly, to talk of ‘two discourses’ is an assumption and a simplification that ignores overlaps and divisions and imposes a politically motivated level of order on the data that may not be warranted; and, secondly, the illustrations provided have been selected for the purposes of this paper in order to meet the theoretical issues discussed and it should not be assumed *a priori* that these are representative of the wider discourse. What I do intend to demonstrate is that the differences I discuss exist and are relevant, but what remains to be challenged, tested and refined through an extended quantitative and qualitative research programmes are the distribution of these differences across groups and the interaction between them.

The first and perhaps most obvious difference between the two discourses, and a very material difference, is the scale at which they operate (the first principle above) and the centring institutions towards which they orient, as indexed by their spatial and temporal reference. Scale, here, can be further elaborated to include both *extension* and *intensity*. Thus, the discourse of the local community operates across a small space but in a relatively saturated way¹⁵ whereas the discourses of national and transnational groups operate over broader expanses of space but in a far less intensive way. A straightforward example of this difference in extension can be seen in the contrast between Angus MacLeod’s focus, above, on the sound of Barra and the Mingulay Reef within the South Minch and the broader focus of Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH)¹⁶ below, which, naturally enough, deals with Scotland as a whole. Note however, that SNH’s focus is itself a downscaling of the European Union’s *Habitats Directive*¹⁷.

Whether looking at your local coastline or the undersea cliffs around St Kilda you will discover a range of spectacular examples of marine biodiversity in Scottish waters. A number of our best examples of species and habitats have been selected for protection as a type of **Marine Protected Area** (MPA) known as marine Special Areas of Conservation

(mSACs). SACs are designated under the European **Habitats Directive**, which is transposed in to Scottish law through the **Habitats Regulations**. SACs form part of the European network of **Natura sites**.

A Special Area of Conservation (SAC) protects one or more special habitats and/or species – terrestrial or marine – listed in the **Habitats Directive**.

Scotland has 239 designated SACs, including three that straddle the border with England. There are also four SACs in Scotland's offshore waters. Together they cover more than 1.17 million hectares (4,500 square miles) of land and inshore waters in Scotland and Scottish offshore waters.

These differences of scale are clearly not purely discursive in nature, but are related to the materiality of the livelihoods of local fishermen, diminishing marine resources (as either an economic or an environmental issue) and the structures of government within Scotland as embedded in the UK and the European Union. These material differences are evident in the intensity as well as the extension of the discourse, as demonstrated by the number of development-based groups the 1200 inhabitants of Barra are involved in, including, but not limited to, the local Community Council¹⁸, *Voluntary Action Barra and Vatersay*¹⁹ and *Coimhearsnachd Bharraigh agus Bhatarsaigh*²⁰, Gàradh A'Bhàgh A'Tuath²¹ and SHAMED itself. In fact, the proliferation of such local organisations – representing scales within scales – can be seen as a difficulty in trying to determine a common purpose (see Singh and Bartlett 2017). A further feature of intensity is the degree of local knowledge with which topographical features are imbued, in ways that interconnect local history, members of the community past and present and the local economy (see the multimodal project *Sgeulachdan na Mara*²²).

These differences in both extension and intensity raise an interesting question with regard to how specific local issues can be contested at a higher scale – the *scalability* of local discourse, the third principle above - not only as the specifics of each case will have to be framed in ways that fit into the logic of the larger scale discourse, but also because this change in scale is generally linked with a change in voice, which is, in turn, inextricably linked to legitimacy (Blommaert 2005). The extent to which and means by which discourses can successfully be rescaled is the subject of Bartlett (2012), which analyses the interplay between international, national and local discourses of development in Guyana, South America. Although I was not knowingly operating with a conception of scales at the time, the book drew on several of the principles sketched out in the introduction to this paper in considering how different voices were given legitimacy within a specific time and place, the wider social conditions and discourses that made this possible, and the means by which one of the main protagonists of the research, Uncle Henry, downscaled the international discourses of development to make them *understandable* at the local scale - which in Uncle Henry's case meant attending not only to *comprehension*, in his glossing of technical language, but also to *empathy*, in his framing of general scientific principles in terms of local experiences and concerns. Three of the main findings from this research are relevant at this point in the discussion. The first of these is that Uncle Henry's success²³ in downscaling was not simply a question of discursive shift in terms of *presupposability of reference* (i.e. assumptions of shared encyclopaedic knowledge), but also shifts in interpersonal features that corresponded to Uncle Henry's cultural capital (Bourdieu 1991) at the local scale (or, more accurately, a mixing of interpersonal features that indexed his unique blend of local and extra-local authority). Secondly, in many instances Uncle Henry's downscaled discourse carried legitimacy where supposedly higher scale discourses did not. This finding provides counter evidence to the idea of a regular hierarchical ordering²⁴, by which legitimacy at a higher scale entails legitimacy at a lower one. It also challenges the related but separate idea of an analogue relationship between scale of

reference and scale of legitimacy - ideas also challenged in other research, notably Kell's (2013) metaphor of Ariadne's thread for the complex movement between scales in the trajectories of meaning making and the legitimization of texts in different contexts. Thirdly, the legitimacy granted to Uncle Henry's discourse was not a function of his way of speaking and his cultural capital *in opposition to* those of the international development workers, but as *complementary to* it, or as piggy-backing on it. In other words, Uncle Henry was able to recontextualise the words of preceding speakers within his own text and so subsume the symbolic capital derived from their association with the external experts within his own hybrid capital as expert in external knowledge and local elder.

Focusing on the first of these points, we can say that a further area of divergence between discourses, relating to the norms and values of different centring institutions, is the nature of the evidence or the epistemic authority that is deemed legitimate. This can be related both to the knowledge type, as *experiential*, *scientific* or *traditionally-acquired knowledge*, and to the source of authority of the speaker, as *institutional*, *relational* or *personal*, for example (see van Leeuwen 2008 for an extended typology of legitimating strategies). In this regard, while the local knowledge base is often, though not exclusively, experiential and relational, combining local memory, lived experience and interpersonal transmission, for SNH and the EU the knowledge base is by default scientific and institutional, as set out in Annexes I and III of the *Marine Strategy Framework Directive* and the following statement with regard to Habitats Regulation Appraisals (HRAs) on the SNH website:

An HRA must be:

- reasoned and recorded throughout to provide an audit trail of the competent authority's thinking
- based on and supported by evidence capable of standing up to scientific scrutiny

In contrast to this, we can say that the picture of Angus MacLeod painted in *FISHUpdate*, busy at work on his prawn boat in the south Minch, is evocative of personal authority derived from experiential knowledge on an intense and localised scale – a very different form of cultural capital (see Bartlett 2012 for a fuller discussion of competing cultural capitals). So, while the reliance of governmental organisations on formal scientific evidence is not unreasonable, transmitting such knowledge and having it accepted might present a great challenge if it cannot be expressed in terms which its intended audience comprehends and, equally importantly, within a worldview with which they can empathise. From this perspective, we can lay at least some of the blame on the experts themselves for what has dismissively been referred to as the “post-truth society”, the idea that the lay public no longer recognises the authority of expertise (*cf.* Angermüller 2018).

Apart from the failure of scientists to get their ideas across to the public, there is a converse and no less important need for local knowledge to be translated into terms that are intelligible to the governmental and scientific community in order that can recognise the validity of other sources of information. Taking both these points together, there is a need not simply to enhance the *public understanding of science* but also to foster the *scientific understanding of the public* in terms of both local knowledge and its means of legitimation and circulation. However, as Sheena hints in the interview quoted above, in the current context, and in contrast with Uncle Henry and scientists in Guyana, experts often demonstrate an inability and unwillingness to communicate across, and potentially reconcile, alternative knowledge bases and sources of authority. The consequences of such a failure to establish connections between the different knowledge bases and authority types is captured in the following interview with a local councillor from the Western Isles, which resonates with SHAMED's emphasis, above, on the workings of power in competing discourses:

- Cllr: ...when you're campaigning on something, or when you're campaigning, you want to improve something or change something, you want to...you want to present it as a fait accompli of right and wrong, and it may not be anything to do with right and wrong, but it needs to be interpreted as right and wrong, and therefore presented... So, the element of conspiracy can easily come in where, and it does pretty regularly, in the form of you're out, you're there to get a particular outcome, you want to reach a particular objective, so it's easy to manipulate the situation to get the results you want out of it.*
- Tom: And you're talking about both sides then are you, X? (.)*
- Cllr: I'm talking about the one side always, when they're coming forward where there, whatever the structure is that's coming forward was wanting to implement the change, whatever that change may be, and that's the...that's the driver, that's where it takes us out of...that's where it takes us down...when you have a campaign for something, whatever it is, if it's to save something, it then automatically falls into 'saved from', 'protected from', and invariably it's protected from the people who are in that area - it's probably got nothing to do with them, but...in fact, with islands like this, that's what really infuriates. But I would probably better describe it as that's what hurts...*
- Tom: And once you've got the hurt...*
- Cllr: Because ((xxx)) fury...because the campaign develops into a 'protected from', invariably that becomes the local inhabitants, the ones that are not as... "they're behind us on intelligence" and all of that, all the prejudices that are carried with it, "out in the sticks" and "out on the edge", whatever it's called. And it's not just a fury...that campaign then by implication goes after these people, these very people, which I am part of, feel particularly wounded because we believe that the environment is what it is because we've been protecting it and we also ourselves arrive at our own conclusion...*

The above examples, from both Barra and Guyana, counter the often implicit assumption that scales are organised in a straightforwardly hierarchical manner. Firstly, the data shows that discourses from higher scales – i.e. centring to more powerful institutions - do not necessarily carry authority in less powerful contexts. As with the historically formed *legal consciousness* on Barra, a specific discourse, or the institution from which it proceeds, may meet intense local resistance. Secondly, *upscaling* local voices into more generalised and abstract chronotopes might be an ineffective strategy in specific contexts as this fails to create an empathetic resonance with the audience. In such cases *downscaling* the abstractions and generalisations of science into the language of local and everyday life is likely to be more effective.

A third, more complex, challenge to the concept of hierarchical ordering becomes apparent when we consider the different webs of meanings through which the concept of sustainability is articulated by the different groups. There are two interrelated ideas to consider here: firstly, whether sustainability is discussed in terms that are either *intrinsic* or *extrinsic* to the local community as a system in its own right; and secondly, the degree to which the different discourses operate either to reorganise the *field* of discourse itself (Torfing 1999:86, cf. Bourdieu 1993) or, less ambitiously, to realign the signification of elements within the field. An example of an extrinsic discourse of sustainability is provided by the SNH website, above, where we see that the increase in extension of scale over the local discourse is matched by a corresponding reduction in complexity, such that a marine site is seen as an element in the wider system of marine sites rather as one of a number of different but interconnected elements that comprise island life. Thus, while the SNH website makes reference to “spectacular examples of marine biodiversity... our best examples of species and habitats [that] have been selected for protection”, no mention is made of the part this marine diversity plays in the social economy of the islands. This contrasts with the intrinsic

discourse of Angus MacLeod, which explicitly links fishing to the local economy and tourism, and the letter from SHAMED in which an absolute reversal of SNH's priorities is signalled. Also noticeably absent from the extrinsic discourse of the government agency is any mention of the efforts of the islanders themselves to protect the local environment, the main source of disillusionment expressed by the local councillor, above.

It is worth noting here, also, that the extrinsic discourse of SNH is linked at a higher scale to the discourse of the EU and resonates with the following extract from EU *Habitats Directive*²⁵:

...in order to ensure the restoration or maintenance of natural habitats and species of Community interest at a favourable conservation status, it is necessary to designate special areas of conservation in order to create a coherent European ecological network according to a specified timetable.

Thus, while the SNH and the EU texts can be seen to be hierarchically related, or *nested*, the local texts relate to a different and potentially incommensurate system of contrasts and values, a point I will return to below.

The second level of contrast in the way the discourses are articulated involves the extent to which different parties recalibrate the *field* as a whole or simply key *signifiers* within an existing field (though the latter of course perturbs the field as a whole to some extent). This issue is discussed in more detail in Bartlett, Montesano Montessori and Lloyd (2017). Drawing on qualitative research into different uses of the signifier *sustainability* on the web, the paper illustrates how large and powerful groups such as Innocent and Nike can talk about *sustainability* as a sister element of terms such as *capitalism* and *democracy* within a broader discourse of the free market economy, thus changing its intrinsic valeur within the shifting field of signification. In contrast, small and relatively powerless organisations such as the Scottish Fishing Federation (SFF) are forced to demonstrate that their own material practices can be construed as moments, or daughter elements, within this (shifting) signification of *sustainability*. The discursively constructed field as a system of interconnecting significations represents what Bernstein (1990:260) would call *voice* - "a cultural larynx which sets the limits on what can be legitimately put together" - and Foucault (2002) labels the *archive* - the limits of what can "be conventionally thought and understandably communicated" and in terms of which we are "normal" (Blommaert 2018:39). Those who are in a position to redefine the field thus control the limits of their own legitimacy while those who can only define their activities within the limits of understandability set by others are destined to have their practices similarly circumscribed. In this way we can see that discourse relations are complex both internally, in terms of the hierarchical structure of collocational relations, and externally, in terms of the inevitable relationship to materiality and power.

5. Towards a conclusion: Incommensurability, materiality and permeability

To sum up the analyses in the previous section in broad terms, we can **provisionally characterise**, on the one hand, the discourse of the communities as based on experiential knowledge and relational authority, intrinsically-oriented and intense, where discursive control is limited to the meaning of individual signifiers; and, on the other hand, the discourse of the governmental organisations, which has its base in scientific knowledge and institutional authority, is extrinsically-oriented and extensive, and where discursive control is liable to stretch to redefinitions of the field itself. These

differences each present their own challenges in terms of fostering a discourse across difference, some of which appear to be more intractable than others.

The differences in degree of extension and intensity between the local and institutional discourses would not necessarily pose a significant problem in a genuinely hierarchically nested system of discourse. In such an idealised case, the institutional discourse deals with general goals, potential problems and proposed activities that apply across a range of sites, while the local discourse deals with specific and concrete instances of these as they apply *in situ*. Discourse between local and institutional actors in such cases would involve upscaling and downscaling information and channelling authority through the relevant actors. While such a practice is by no means straightforward nor power-free, it is possible, as Bartlett (2012) demonstrates in the Guyanese context. Such rescaling presupposes, however, a genuinely hierarchical social system with nested discourses operating at different degrees of extension and abstraction. In such a case, discursive elements have the same signification, or *valeur*, for the different participants, and it is such equivalence that allows not only for agreement but also for *communicable difference* when disputes arise. This is not, of course, to suggest either perfect communication or total harmony between the different groups. There may well be a difference of opinion about the best way to handle problems on the ground or even over the general goals that are being promoted, and the most likely result is that the groups operating at higher scales and representing the more powerful centring institutions will ultimately decide on policies and procedures.

The current context is more complex, however, and such a hierarchical scaling of discourses cannot be assumed. In contrast to the idealised case above, key elements such as *fishing* and even *sustainability* itself operate within systems of signification which are *not only different in scale but distinct in composition*. At the local scale, for example, *fishing* may be a sister signifier of schooling, jobs and housing within the field of social sustainability, while at the national and international scale it may be a sister of marine pollution and renewable energy within the fields of global environmental sustainability and economic cooperation. In other words, for the different groups, the concept of *fishing* gains its meaning within two distinct systems of oppositions which are not hierarchically nested but *incommensurate*. And while such a situation may be predicted by scales theory, the concept of rescaling fails to offer a solution to the problem as the terms of discussion between communities and (inter)national organisations not only have a different significance at different scales, but a different *signification*, leading to a crisis of communicable difference that cannot be solved by rescaling alone.

What is more the socio-discursive systems of both the local community and organisations such as SNH are contingent on the material conditions in which they are produced. For SNH, the problems of diminishing fish stocks and marine degradation are material realities with potentially devastating consequences for the global environmental system and food production. For the people of Barra *fishing* is more than a concept in a system of significations, it is the main source of income on the island and the survival of the community as a social system is largely dependent on the interrelation of fishing with other material elements of the system. In other words, unlike nation states, small, tightly integrated social systems such as that on Barra are more than simply imagined communities (Anderson 1983) which can be dissolved and reimagined. Consequently, approaches to discourse across difference such as Habermas's (1984) *communicative rationality* or Mouffe's (2014) version of *agonism* are unworkable in such contexts. The principle limitation of Habermas's consensus-based approach is that it presumes and champions a culture-free and normative communicative rationality rather than a performative approach that acknowledges and adapts itself to the contingency of the discursive field and of cultural systems. These, as we have seen, are embedded in historical understandings, potentially leading to distinct legal consciousnesses rather than a single communicative rationality, and in relations of power, as made clear in the SHAMED letter and other

texts above. Mouffe's alternative suggestion for agonistic discourse, in which opponents are seen as friendly adversaries rather than as enemies, also runs into problems, as it proposes a rearticulation of identities away from singular "allegiance...to a certain place or a certain property" (Torfing 1999:255) and towards multiple, pluralistic and supralocal identities. As argued above, the incommensurate nature of the discourses at the different scales would mean that allegiance to supralocal identities would entail a denial of the local system of signification and, given the material contingency of that system, such a denial is not possible in practice (see Carpentier 2017 for a further critique of Mouffe and Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) lack of attention to materiality).

Moving towards a conclusion, it would seem that an agenda that seeks to make incommensurate discourse commensurate is either hegemonic, equating the norms of the dominant bloc with rationality, as Mouffe (2014) claims of Habermas's approach, or fails to recognise the importance of the material, as with Mouffe's purely discursive conception of identity. However, there is room for manoeuvre once we return to the idea stated above that scales theory raises questions of the *differential distribution* of linguistic resources amongst different sectors of the population. The crucial idea here is that a differential distribution is of course not absolute, but a matter of degree (or *scale*, if you will). While different social groups may tend towards a particular discourse practice, in reality people always belong to and have semiotic histories pertaining to multiple material fields and multiple discourse types across a variety of scales. As a result, within any discursive contexts – even one in which all participants are native of a small island - there will be a range of semiotic histories and discursive resources at play across several scales of activity, both above and below the level of the intrinsic discourse of the island as a single imagined community (Singh and Bartlett 2017). In other words, at the level of community, while "allegiance to a certain place" may be paramount, such an identity is already composed of complex discourses that extend beyond the locality. Conversely, while EU and SNH documents *tend towards* extrinsic discourse and the field of environmental sustainability, there are also overlaps with the intrinsic discourse of the community and the field of social sustainability, as in the following extract from the EU's *Marine Strategy Frameworks Directive*²⁶:

By applying an ecosystem-based approach to the management of human activities while enabling a sustainable use of marine goods and services, priority should be given to achieving or maintaining good environmental status in the Community's marine environment, to continuing its protection and preservation, and to preventing subsequent deterioration.

In practical terms, enhancing and exploiting such permeability is dependent on developing within opposing groups a recognition of the integral nature of contested concepts within the material and discursive system of the other, an acknowledgment of both the difference and the potential compatibility of the two systems, and respect for their mutual dependence at different scales. On this basis, the discourses of each group can be contingently *revoiced* in audience with the other (*cf.* Bartlett 2012) - rather than simply "putting stuff on" them, as Sheena (above) describes it. As pointed out in SHAMED's response to my open letter, this is not simply a matter of communication, but a matter of power, and rescaling implies not just textual tweaking, but an understanding and acceptance of the knowledge base and interpersonal relations of the other – and of our own - as instruments of power.

The concept of scales is important for policy analysis, therefore, not only in its formulation in human geography, but also in its reworking in discourse analysis. From the perspective of human geography, the central concept to take on board is that social groupings at different scales do not simply operate across different extensions with more or less restricted interests, but rather

according to different logistics, with the result that legislating across scales is a more complex exercise than simply downsizing or upsizing a one-size-fits all policy. And accompanying these different logistics are different *logics of practice* (Bourdieu 1990), the discursive manifestations of the material conditions, social relations and historical consciousness that have developed according to the particularities of each local context. In order to facilitate policy analysis, therefore, what is needed of discourse analysts is an enhanced conception of scales that accounts for complex and non-hierarchical sociodiscursive relations and the relations of *permeability* that exist within and between contexts: within contexts, when discourses at different scales successfully cohabit; and between contexts, when alternative voices are transposed and legitimated while maintaining the integrity of their origin. This necessitates an abductive approach, constantly toing and froing between theory and application, building on the key concepts of *voice* and the *scope of communicability*, of *layered simultaneity*, *polycentricity* and *rescaling* as these are tested in the very material contexts of practice.

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¹ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2015/6/contents/enacted>

² This idea has in itself been updated, reconceived and reworded in several papers. One recent formulation (Blommaert, Westinen and Leppänen 2015) refers to the degree of presupposability of indexicals within a text/discourse.

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-south-scotland-44548043> accessed 27/9/18

⁴ <https://www.stornowaygazette.co.uk/news/school-can-t-count-on-a-maths-teacher-1-3876674> accessed 27/9/18

⁵ <http://www.welovebarraandvatersay.com/index.php/contact-us-barra-vatersay-2/271-barra-vatersay-welcome/8279-tourist-offices-axed-in-major-shake-up-2> accessed 27/9/18

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- ⁶ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/4551428.stm> accessed 27/9/18
- ⁷ http://www.parliament.scot/S5_EconomyJobsFairWork/Inquiries/Note_of_meeting_-_Scottish_Fishermens_Federation.pdf accessed 27/9/18
- ⁸ <http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-23>
- ⁹ <https://www.fishupdate.com/dismay-at-barra-conservation-outcome-fishupdate-com/> accessed 27/9/18
- ¹⁰ This refers to the commonly held feeling that policy-makers in Brussels do not have to account for the results of their policies in the same way that more local government structures do.
- management
- ¹¹ This interview is one of a series in which people on Barra discuss sustainability and self-management from different local perspectives. The interviews are part of an ongoing research project *Sustainability on the Edge*.
- ¹² <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2015/6/contents/enacted>
- ¹³ <https://beta.gov.scot/publications/community-empowerment-scotland-act-summary/>
- ¹⁴ <https://blogs.gov.scot/marine-scotland/2014/02/20/barra-step-forward-for-community-management-of-sac/>
- ¹⁵ And see Singh and Bartlett (2017) for a discussion of the local chronotope as narrow in space but deep in time.
- ¹⁶ <http://www.snh.gov.uk/protecting-scotlands-nature/protected-areas/international-designations/sac/marine-sacs/> Accessed January 2018.
- ¹⁷ http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/legislation/habitatsdirective/index_en.htm Accessed 28/9/18
- ¹⁸ <https://www.cne-siar.gov.uk/your-council/community-councils/>
- ¹⁹ <http://www.vabv.org.uk/>
- ²⁰ <http://www.isleofbarra.com/coimhearsachdbharraigh.htm>
- ²¹ <http://www.garadh.org/>
- ²² <http://www.mappingthesea.net/barra/>
- ²³ As attested both through an analysis of subsequent discourse and follow-up interviews.
- ²⁴ It does not, however, negate the idea of a local hierarchy.
- ²⁵ Council Directive 92/43/EEC of 21 May 1992
- ²⁶ <http://eurlex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32008L0056&from=EN>